

# *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*

## Parashat Balak

NUMBERS 22:2-25:9

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### *Parashat Balak Study Guide Themes*

Theme 1: The Seer Balaam—Have Vision Will Travel

Theme 2: It's a Slippery Slope—the Dangers of Foreign Women

### INTRODUCTION



In *Parashat Balak* the Israelites are camped on the plains of Moab, ready to enter Canaan. In the midst of their final preparations to enter the land God promised to their ancestors, yet another obstacle emerges. Balak, king of Moab, grows concerned about the fierce reputation of the Israelites, which he observed in the Israelites' encounter with the Amorites (Numbers 21:21–32). Balak's subjects worry that the Israelites, due to their large numbers, will devour the resources of Moab. In response, Balak hires a well-known seer named Balaam to curse the Israelites, thus reflecting the widely held belief in the ancient world that putting a curse on someone was an effective means of subduing an enemy. The standoff between the powers of the God of Israel and those of a foreign seer proves to be no contest. Even Balaam's talking female donkey, who represents the biblical ideal of wisdom, recognizes the efficacy of God's power—unlike her human master, the professional seer. Although hired to curse the Israelites, Balaam ends up blessing them instead. In a series of four oracles, Balaam ultimately does the opposite of what Balak desires and establishes that the power of Israel's God is greater than even the most skilled human seers. The parashah concludes with an incident that carries a dire warning about the dangers of worshipping foreign gods. Moabite women entice Israelite men into sexual relations and then invite the men to partake in ritual sacrifice to the Canaanite god Baal-peor. Although the account focuses on the actions of one couple killed by the priest Phinehas, God sends a punishing plague that kills 24,000 Israelites. *Parashat Balak* teaches that if the Israelites are to inherit the Promised Land, they must acknowledge that true power resides only in the God of Israel.

## BEFORE GETTING STARTED



Before turning to the biblical text and the questions presented below, use the introductory material in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* to provide an overview of the parashah as a whole. Draw attention to a few key quotations from the introduction to the Central Commentary on pages 937–38 and/or survey the outline on page 938. This will help you highlight some of the main themes in this parashah and give participants a context for the sections they will study within the larger portion. Also, remember that when the study guide asks you to read biblical text, take the time to examine the associated comments in the Central Commentary. This will help you answer questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.

### THEME 1: THE SEER BALAAM—HAVE VISION WILL TRAVEL



King Balak's decision to hire a seer to curse his Israelite enemy into obliteration represents a "best leadership practice" in the ancient world. Balak spares no effort or expense, hiring a big-name seer, one known for his effective use of divination. Balaam's direct encounter with the God of Israel makes him wary of helping Balak, but he agrees to do so, with the understanding that he will not do anything that is "contrary to the command of my God *YHVH*" (Numbers 22:18). The narrative mocks Balaam's competence as a seer through the tale of Balaam's talking female donkey, who is able to "see" what her master cannot—the presence of an angel of God. The text demonstrates God's ultimate power, as the curses through which Balaam is supposed to destroy the Israelites become blessings instead.

1. Read Numbers 22:2–6, which describes the reasons that the Moabite king, Balak, wants to hire the seer Balaam.
  - a. According to this passage, what worries Balak and the personified land of Moab?
  - b. What imagery does Balak use to describe these concerns, and how does this imagery help you to understand his fears? In Exodus 1:7 and 1:10, Pharaoh describes his fears about the Israelites in similar terms. What does this comparison tell us about where the Israelites are in their journey toward peoplehood?
  - c. In your view, what is the relationship between the views of Moab (Numbers 22:3–4) and Balak's decision to take action against the Israelites?
  - d. What information do we learn about Balaam from why Balak wishes to hire him? What do non-biblical sources tell us about Balaam (see Central Commentary, p. 939)?
  - e. According to the Central Commentary (p. 939), what was the purpose of putting a curse on someone in antiquity?

2. Read Numbers 22:7–8, which describes the visit of a group of Moabite and Midianite elders to Balaam.
  - a. Verse 7 tells us that elders of Moab and Midian, “versed in divination,” set out to find Balaam. According to the Central Commentary to this verse, what do we know about the presence of women among such a group of elders in the ancient Near East? What does the story of the Israelite woman in II Samuel 20:15–22 suggest about the possibility that women may have filled the role we might expect elders to play in Israelite society?
  - b. The Hebrew word *kesem* (“divination”) refers to the taking of omens, a popular practice in the ancient Near East. Read Deuteronomy 18:9–14. What do these verses indicate about the Torah’s attitude toward divination? What does Leviticus 20:27 add to your understanding?
  
3. Read Numbers 22:9–14, which describes Balaam’s encounter with God.
  - a. The first mention of God in this parashah occurs in 22:9. What is the purpose, in your view, of the question God asks Balaam in this verse? How does this question portray God’s knowledge of human actions?
  - b. In Genesis 12:2–3, 22:17–18, and 28:13–14 God bestows specific blessings on the patriarchs and their descendants. What is the relationship between these texts and the reason God tells Balaam that he must not curse the Israelites? Why do you think God communicates this information to Balaam?
  - c. What reason does Balaam give the elders in Numbers 22:13 for why he will not go with them? How does this contrast with what the elders tell Balak in 22:14?
  
4. Balak sends a second group of dignitaries to urge Balaam to reconsider. God instructs Balaam that he may go with them, as long as he does what God commands (Numbers 22:15–20). Read Numbers 22:21–35, which describes Balaam’s journey to Balak.
  - a. The Hebrew root *r-‘h* (“to see”) appears five times in these verses (vv. 23, 25, 27, 31, 33). Why do you think this root appears so often? What does it convey about the story? What is the relationship between God’s uncovering Balaam’s eyes (v. 31) and the repeated use of the word “see”?
  - b. What is the role of the “adversary” in these verses?
  - c. What is the significance of the fact that the donkey is a female? According to the Central Commentary, how is the donkey’s perspicacity related to the biblical ideas of Lady Wisdom (Proverbs 8–9) and the wise woman (Woman of Valor in Proverbs 31)? What allows the commentator to make this link?
  - d. Why, in your view, does only the donkey see the angel of God and not Balaam?

- e. What is the relationship between the donkey’s ability to speak (Numbers 22:28–30) and God’s will?
  - f. Compare Balaam’s portrayal in these verses to his portrayal in 22:5–14. What, in your view, accounts for this difference?
5. Read Numbers 24:1–9, which contains Balaam’s third oracle.
- a. In 24:1 Balaam looks towards the “wilderness,” yet in verses 6–7, he describes the Israelite encampment as a lush oasis. How might you explain this difference?
  - b. What image of Israel does Balaam paint with the words in verse 5? In your view, why might these words have been chosen for the opening of the morning liturgy (*Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov*)?
6. Read the passage on “Balaam son of Beor” in Post-biblical Interpretations by Judith Baskin (pp. 954–55).
- a. According to Baskin, how do Numbers 31:16 and rabbinic literature depict Balaam? How does this compare with your impression of Balaam in this parashah?
  - b. According to Midrash *B’midbar Rabbah* 14.20, why does God bestow special abilities on Balaam?
7. Read the Contemporary Reflection by Sue Levi Elwell (pp. 956–57).
- a. According to Levi Elwell, what is the central irony of the story of Balak and Balaam?
  - b. How does Balaam’s description of the Israelites in the third oracle (Numbers 24:6–7) describe a community of mutual dependence and trust? How does this vision change at the end of this oracle (v. 9)?
  - c. How do the verses from Psalms that the Rabbis added to *Mah tovu ohalecha, Yaakov / mishk’notecha, Yisrael* (“How fair are your tents, O Jacob / Your dwellings, O Israel!”) enable each worshipper to “claim a place as a member of the collective”? How do these added verses transform the God of war at the end of the third oracle into a God of *chesed* (loving-kindness)?
  - d. How does Levi Elwell’s version of *Mah tovu* expand and alter the version of this prayer in our liturgy? In what ways can this vision of *Mah tovu* help us to build sacred communities?
8. Read “Balak” by Laurie Patton, in *Voices* (p. 958).
- a. What does the poet’s description of her dog’s eyes in the poem’s first stanza convey about how she views her dog?
  - b. Describe the contrast between the dog’s seemingly deliberate actions in the poem’s second and third stanzas (and the first line of the fourth

- stanza) with how the poet portrays the dog in the fifth stanza.
- c. What happens between the poet and her dog when she and the dog gaze at one another when “that frustrating scrim” that separates humans from animals is lifted?
  - d. What understanding does Patton hope to gain from her dog as a result of their midnight encounter?
  - e. In what ways is the dog—like the talking she-donkey in this parashah—a conduit for revelation of something ineffable?
  - f. How can paying attention to nonconventional sources of connection and communication help us to see that which is holy on our path?

## THEME 2: IT’S A SLIPPERY SLOPE—THE DANGERS OF FOREIGN WOMEN



After Balaam’s departure, the text continues by describing how, while encamped on the plains of Moab waiting to enter the Promised Land, Israelite men defile themselves by having sexual relations with Moabite women. The Moabite women then entice the Israelite men into joining their ritual sacrifices, thus leading to the Israelite worship of Baal-peor, a Canaanite god. In presenting Moabite women as dangerous enticers, this text corresponds with other sections of the Bible that prohibit marriage to foreign women. God’s punishment is swift and severe: all the leaders of the people are to be publically impaled, a punishment that Moses succeeds in reducing to just those who associated with the Moabite women. In addition, God sends a plague that kills 24,000 Israelites. The plague is checked when the priest Phinehas—grandson of Aaron—kills an Israelite man and a Moabite woman who are guilty of apostasy, thus expiating their sin.

1. Read Numbers 25:1–5, which describes the Israelites’ contact with Moabite women and their subsequent worship of Moabite gods.
  - a. The Hebrew roots *h-l-l* (“to profane, to pollute oneself”) and *z-n-h* (“to act as a harlot”) both appear in 25:1. What does this tell us about how the biblical author views Moabite women?
  - b. The Hebrew *vayochal* (literally “ate”) is translated in 25:2 as “partook of them.” How does this help you to understand the ritual activity the Moabite women entice the Israelite men to join? How does this sin differ from that of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:1–6)?
  - c. According to Numbers 25:4, whom does God command Moses to put to death for this sin? What are the purposes of this public punishment?
  - d. How does God’s instruction to Moses in verse 4 differ from Moses’ instruction to the Israelite officials in verse 5? Why do you think Moses did not follow God’s exact instruction here?

2. Read Numbers 25:6–9, which describes the actions of Phinehas against the couple who commit apostasy.
  - a. How does 25–6 identify the woman in question? How does this differ from the identification of the women in verse 1? Who are the Midianites, according to Genesis 25:1–4? Zipporah, Moses’ wife, is the daughter of Jethro, a Midianite priest (Exodus 2:21 and 18:1–12). What can we learn from these texts about how the Bible views Midianites?
  - b. In your view, why are the people weeping (Numbers 25:6)? What is the significance of where the people weep?
  - c. According to the Central Commentary, to what does the Hebrew word *hakubbah* (translated here as “the chamber”) in verse 8 refer? How does this help you to understand the nature of the couple’s transgression?
  - d. What is the relationship between Phinehas’ action in verses 7–8 and the cessation of the plague? How does this compare with the plague that follows the sin of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:35)? In what way does Exodus 32:34 presage the punishment for the transgression of the Israelite man with the Midianite woman in this parashah?
  
3. Read the Another View section by Hilary Lipka (p. 954).
  - a. According to Lipka, how does the commentator Ibn Ezra view the actions of the Israelite man in bringing the Midianite woman to “his companions” (as this translation states in Numbers 25:6)? How does Ibn Ezra’s translation this word (*echav*) help us to understand this verse in a different way?
  - b. What questions are raised by this incident, and how does Ibn Ezra’s interpretation answer them?
  - c. If we accept Ibn Ezra’s interpretation, according to Lipka, we can view the *kubbah* (“chamber”) in verse 8 as a marriage canopy where the couple goes in order to consummate their marriage. How does this attitude toward intermarriage conflict with the attitude toward intermarriage in other biblical stories (see Exodus 2:16–21 and 4:24–26; also the book of Ruth, where Ruth—a Moabite woman—becomes the progenitor of King David)?
  
4. Read Post-biblical Interpretations by Judith R. Baskin on verses 25:1, 25:2, and 25:6 (p. 955).
  - a. According to *B’midbar Rabbah* 20.22, what is the reason for the Israelites’ sexual lapse at Shittim? What is the connection in this midrash between Shittim and Sodom?
  - b. What are the conflicting ways in which the Rabbis portray the origins of the Moabites, who derive from the incestuous union of Lot and his older

daughter (Genesis 19:33–35)?

- c. How do BT *Sanhedrin* 106a and other rabbinic sources portray the origins of the plot to seduce the Israelite men?
- d. According to *B'midbar Rabbah* 20.24, what accounts for the weeping of Moses and the Israelite leaders in Numbers 25:6? How does the parable in this midrash help you to understand the reasons for this weeping? Have you ever felt shocked or betrayed by the actions of a family member or friend? If so, how do your feelings help you to understand the reasons for the Israelites' weeping?



## OVERARCHING QUESTIONS

As you study these parts of the *parashah*, keep in mind the following overarching questions. If time permits, conclude the class with these broader questions:

1. Can you think of a time in your life when you felt the presence of something sacred? If so, how has this experience helped you to be more aware of that which is sacred in your life and in the world around you?
2. *Parashat Balak* presents a dire view of the consequences of associating with foreign cultures in its depiction of the Moabite women's relations with Israelite men. Unlike the ancient Israelites who occupied and settled the Promised Land, we live in a society where we are the minority and where we associate regularly with members of other religious groups and cultures. How do these associations affect your view of yourself as a Jew? What are the benefits and challenges of these associations?

## CLOSING QUESTIONS

1. What new insight into the Torah did you gain from today's study?
2. What other new insights did you gain from this study?
3. What questions remain?



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